

Linguistic Relationship, Language Shifting, and Historical Inference¹⁾

By Paul Newman

A grouping of languages into families and subfamilies is an evolutionary-historical, or "genetic" classification, not to be confused with a strictly typological grouping of languages on the basis of similarities in phonology, syntax, or lexicon. The conventional means of representing genetic relationship has been the family tree diagram, in which the ordinate, though seldom explicitly labelled as such, depicts time in the past. It is because the notion of linguistic relationship directly embodies time depth that scholars interested in African history have considered linguistic classification to be so important. For example, Greenberg has stated: "In one way or another, classification is the basis for practically all historical inference drawn from language. . . ." ²⁾ Murdock writes similarly: "In the absence of written records, linguistic relationships provide by far the most dependable evidence of historical connections." ³⁾

Explicit justification for the manner in which linguistic classifications are used for historical inference is seldom given, but an argument like the following is generally understood: language classification provides time perspective about languages; languages are transmitted and persist through time because people, who are their carriers, persist; therefore, statements about the history of languages can be translated into statements about the history of peoples. Notwithstanding some recognition of theoretical flaws in the above argument, anthropologists and historians have tended in practice to take over linguistic family tree diagrams as is, state that the labels refer to populations rather than to languages, and then assume that the results approximate actual history. ⁴⁾ Thus it is generally taken for granted that people who speak the same language or related languages have a common historical origin and constitute the continuation of what was a single population in the past.

If the only way in which languages could be transmitted were vertically from one generation to the next (along connecting lines in a family tree diagram) then language history and population history

would be isomorphic. But this is not so, for there is also the possibility of horizontal transmission, i.e. a group of people may adopt the language of another group in place of their own. Whenever this phenomenon (which I will henceforth refer to as 'language shifting') takes place, a linguistic classification will fail to give a true picture of the history of the population which shifted. Or, to put it differently, where history established on the basis of oral traditions, archeology, and other non-linguistic evidence conflicts with present linguistic relationships, we can suspect language shifting as the cause of the discrepancy.

In this paper I shall briefly explore a few cases of discrepancy between oral history and linguistic relationship with special reference to the phenomenon of language shifting. The discussion will focus on seven Tera villages located within a 25 mile radius of Bima Hill on the River Gongola in northeastern Nigeria. The inhabitants of these villages speak a common language and clearly identify themselves as Tera. Considering their linguistic relationship—identity of language of course being the closest relationship possible—we might expect the people of all these villages to have a common origin and to share a common history of migrations. On the basis of oral traditions, however, the villages fall into two distinct groups, each denying historical ties with the other.⁵) One of the groups (Group 1), includes Zambuk, Kwal, Wuyo, and the non-Tera speaking Kafarati; the other group (Group 2) includes Hinna, Deba, Kurba, and Shinga (see Figure 1).

Traditional histories collected in Group 1 villages recount a migration from Yamal (now identified with Yemen) to Gaanda (in Adamawa Province), Shani, Walama, Sugwa (a hill east of Wuyo), Bima Hill, and then across the Gongola into the present area. This tradition of a migration from the east skirting the southern edge of the Biu Plateau is fully consistent with the present distribution of the language cluster to which Tera belongs.⁶)

The oral histories of Group 2 recount a combined migration from Yamal to Bornu with the Kanuri and Bolewa peoples. The Kanuri were left behind in Bornu and the migration continued to Fika, the present Bolewa capital. There the group split, the Bolewa occupying Fika and areas to the southwest, the Tera moving further south and down the Gongola (see Figure 2).

Both traditions are well known in their respective villages and exhibit consistency in detail even when testimonies independently collected in geographically distant villages of the same group are

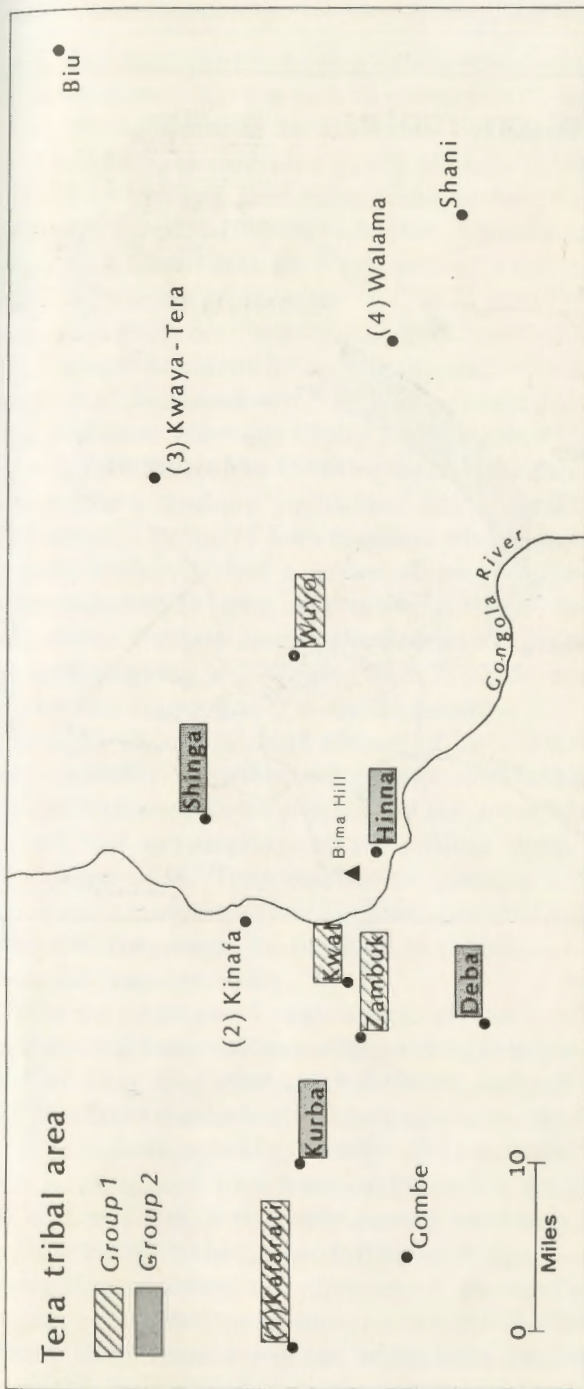


Figure 1

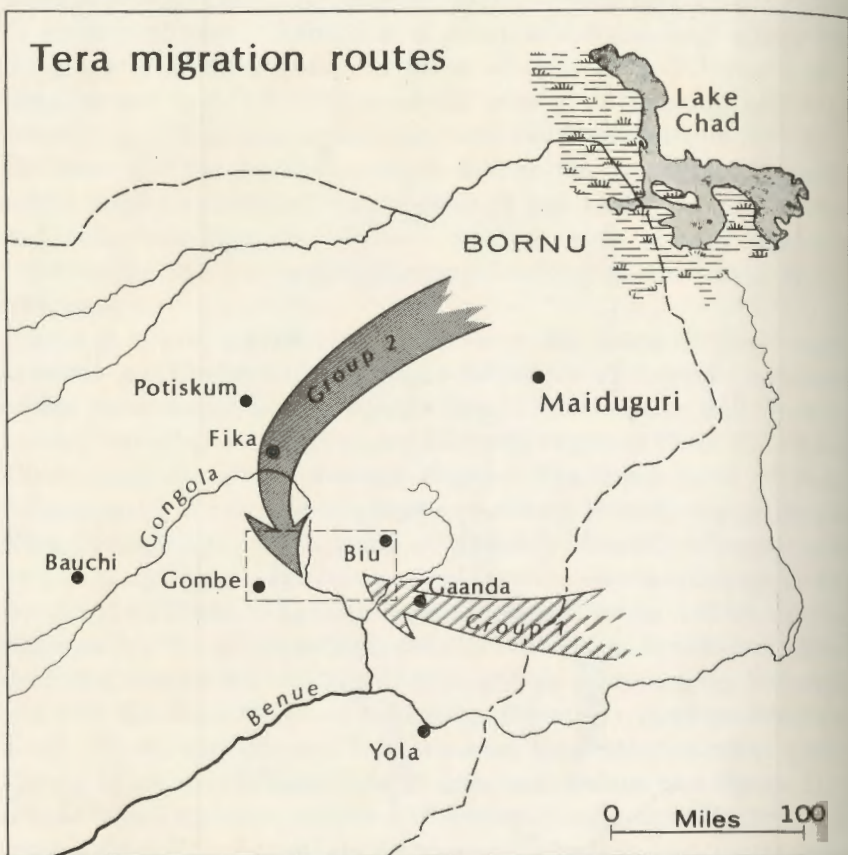


Figure 2

compared. The traditions have also exhibited remarkable consistency over time, evidenced by the fact that early British officers recorded migration stories identical to the ones I collected some 50 years later.⁷⁾ Certainly there are no *a priori* grounds for doubting the historical accuracy of these traditions, when, in fact, there is now abundant evidence to support the view that "traditional histories may preserve historical information for several hundred years with a relatively high degree of accuracy."⁸⁾

I conclude, therefore, that both Tera traditions 'contain some truth and that there were in fact two migrations—acknowledging as a corollary that both ancestor populations could not have been Tera speaking. Evidence points to Group 2 as the one which did not originally speak Tera. If so, the following sequence can be reconstructed: the present Tera speaking population derives from two historically distinct sources, a group of Tera speakers who migrated from the east (the present Group 1) and a group of people speaking a different language (probably Bolewa) who moved in from the north. Due to contact between the two groups, the Bolewa speakers eventually gave up their own language and adopted Tera, with the result that Groups 1 and 2 are now linguistically indistinguishable.

Interestingly enough a short history of Deba (one of the Group 2 villages), explicitly describes a language shift: "These people who came [i.e. the present Deba people] did not speak the Tera language at all. Tera was the language of the natives whom they came and found in the country. They came with theirs, a different language. Because of their smallness, their language perished and thus it became necessary that they learn the language of the natives, i.e. Tera, which is their major language today."⁹⁾

It should be emphasized that certain rights, privileges, and obligations remain in force between villages recognizing a common history even though they may now speak different languages. For example, Kafarati, a village considered by the Teras to belong to Group 1 even though it is Bolewa speaking, retains close political and ceremonial ties with Zambuk and to a lesser extent with Kwal as well. If the chief of Kafarati dies, a successor cannot be chosen without the approval of the Zambuk chief, who, furthermore, plays an important role in the ceremony of investiture. Conversely, the chief of Kafarati must be included in deliberations whenever a new chief is chosen for Zambuk.

Similarly there remain vestigial obligations between Group 2 villages and the Bolewa living to the north, evidencing their remote

historical ties. For example, at Hinna I was told that if the chief of Fika dies, then either the Hinna chief or his vizier must personally go to express condolence and vice versa if a Hinna chief dies. Between Zambuk and Hinna, on the other hand, rights and obligations are minimal even though the two towns share a common language.

The above shows that in spite of the fact that they both speak the Tera language, Groups 1 and 2 retain aspects of their historical distinctiveness. This being the case, one could hypothesize that these groups of villages should also exhibit cultural differences deriving from their separate origins. It would be an interesting and worthwhile research project to check this out by comparative ethnographic work.

Language shifting was posited for one group of Tera speakers in order to reconstruct a history consistent with oral traditions. The likelihood of this interpretation being correct is strengthened by the multiplicity of similar occurrences in this geographical area, which is characterized by a remarkable propensity for language shifting. To document the assertion that the postulated instance of language shifting by Group 2 Teras is neither unique nor unusual, I will briefly describe a few other cases where current linguistic relationships and historical ties are out of step because of recent language shifts.¹⁰⁾

(1) As mentioned above, the village of Kafarati is included in the traditional histories of Group 1 Tera villages even though it is Bolewa speaking. Explanation: In earlier times there was an old Tera village named Kwamu, historically belonging to the Group 1 complex and closely allied with Zambuk. After the founding of Kafarati by Bolewas in the middle of the nineteenth century Kwamu was absorbed by the fast growing Bolewa town.¹¹⁾ Kwamu soon lost its separate identity and, in time, the Tera speakers gave up their own language for that of their politically and numerically dominant fellow townsmen. Most Teras now treat the name Kafarati as simply a new designation for the old town of Kwamu and thus use the two names interchangeably when discussing history. Nevertheless, knowledgeable older men recognize that this usage is inexact and that strictly speaking only Kwamu should be included in Tera historical traditions.

(2) The village of Kinafa is Tera speaking although members of the village consider themselves to be Bolewa. Explanation: The language shift from Bolewa to Tera occurred in this century due to economic and political domination by Gwani, a large and powerful Tera village located just across the Gongola River to the east. In this instance the

language shift is so recent that the village members can easily distinguish between the language they speak (Tera) and their ethnic affiliation (Bolewa).

(3) In spite of its name, the town Kwaya-Tera is Bura speaking and most of its inhabitants consider themselves Bura. When Teras are asked about the town, however, they insist that it is really Tera. Explanation: Previously there was a Tera speaking village at or near the present site. Buras who occupied the hills to the east moved down to the flat land and settled near the Tera village. (Remains of old deserted terraces can still be seen on the hillsides.) As the population increased, what may have been two nearby villages became sections of a single town. As a result of the contact situation in which the Buras came to be dominant in population, power, and/or prestige, the indigenous Tera speakers dropped their own language and adopted Bura.

(4) The population of Walama speaks the Pidlimndi dialect of Tera although it considers itself Kanakuru.¹²) The village has close political and religious ties with Shani, an important Kanakuru village, and its population can be identified as Kanakuru on the basis of ethnological criteria. Explanation: The answer lies in the inhabitants' own testimony that they settled in Walama quite recently whereupon they adopted the language of the people they found there. As in the case of Kinafa, the recentness of the shift permits the population to distinguish between language and ethnicity.

The primary aim of this paper has been to point up the risks in uncritically drawing historical inferences about common origin and migrations from present linguistic relationships. The weakness of linguistic classification for historical reconstruction stems from the fact that such classifications do not take into account language shifting. On the basis of linguistic evidence alone there is no way to distinguish relationships due to common ancestry from those resulting from an historically distinct population shifting its language. This poses a serious problem for the historian attempting to interpret linguistic data since, as I have shown, shifting cannot be dismissed on the grounds that it is a rare phenomenon.

Notes

- 1) An earlier version of this paper was presented at the meetings of the African Studies Association, New York, 1967. Field work in

Northern Nigeria during 1965-66 was supported by a grant from the Foreign Area Fellowship Program. I am also grateful to the African Studies Center, University of Ibadan, for their assistance during that year. The maps accompanying this paper were kindly prepared by Miss Anna K. Bennett.

- 2) J. H. Greenberg, 'Historical inferences from linguistic research in sub-Saharan Africa', in J. Butler (ed.), *Boston University Papers in African History*, vol. 1 (Boston, 1964), 6.
- 3) G. P. Murdock, *Africa: Its Peoples and their Culture History* (New York, 1959), 12.
- 4) Note the casual shift from 'language' to 'people' in the following statement by the usually very precise Greenberg: "The importance of classification is that by this means *languages* are classed together as showing unmistakable evidence of common origin, that is, as ultimately deriving from divisions in an original speech community..." J. Greenberg, 'Historical inferences...', 6 (*italics mine*).
- 5) Similar findings have been reported from the Gabon: "La repartition des peuples gabonais en groupes linguistiques... pourrait faire croire à l'uniformité des origines de chacun de ces groupes... En réalité les traditions sont loin d'être uniformes pour un même groupe." H. Deschamps, 'Traditions orales au Gabon', in J. Vansina, R. Mauny, and L. V. Thomas (eds.), *The Historian in Tropical Africa* (London, 1964), 171.
- 6) For the linguistic evidence see P. Newman and R. Ma, 'Comparative Chadice: phonology and lexicon', *Journal of African Languages* V (1966), 218—251.
- 7) The Group 1 tradition is reported by F. Edgar, 'Miscellaneous notes on the peoples of the Biu Division', (ms. 1923), while the Group 2 tradition can be found in Carlyle's 'History of Gombe Emirate', (ms. 1914).
- 8) David M. Pendergast and Clement W. Meighan, 'Folk traditions as historical fact: a Paiute example', *Journal of American Folklore* LXXII (1959), 132. See also: C. W. Meighan, 'More on folk traditions', *Journal of American Folklore* LXXIII (1960), 59—60. The opposing point of view (in my opinion now discredited) was voiced most strongly by Lowie: "I cannot attach to oral tradition any historical value whatsoever under any conditions whatsoever." R. Lowie, 'Oral tradition and history: discussion and correspondence', *American Anthropologist* XVII (1915), 598. For a survey

of various opinions on the value of oral tradition as historical source material, see Chapter I of J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, trans. by H. M. Wright (Chicago, 1965).

- 9) Anon., 'Tarihin Deba daga 1553—1965', (ms. 1965). The original Hausa reads as follows: "Wadannan mutane da suka zo ko kadan ba sa yaren Teranci. Teranci dai yaren irin arnan da suko zo suka samu a kasar. Su sun zo ne da nasu yaren dabam. Don kankan-tansu shi ya sa yarensu ya halaka ya zamo dole ne suka koyi yaren arnar kasar watau Teranci wanda shi ke shi ne babban yarensu a yau."
- 10) The villages to be discussed are numbered on Figure 1 in the order in which they are taken up.
- 11) For nineteenth century Bolewa history, I am relying heavily on Victor N. Low, *The Border States: a Political History of Three Northeast Nigerian Emirates, ca. 1800—1902*. (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Los Angeles, 1967).
- 12) Kanakuru refer to themselves as Dera.

Einige nordafrikanische Pflanzennamen bei Dioscurides

Von Inge Hofmann

Bei der Durchsicht der „Materia Medica“ des Pedanii Dioscuridis¹⁾ fielen mir die „afrikanischen“ Synonyme einiger Pflanzennamen auf. Da sie meines Wissens von seiten der Berberologie noch nicht ausgewertet wurden, möchte ich sie in alphabetischer Anordnung hier folgen lassen. Herr Dr. Alfred Willms machte mich darauf aufmerksam, daß einige Morpheme der Pflanzennamen bereits als punisch erkannt sind, und verweist in diesem Zusammenhang auf Johannes Friedrich, *Phönizisch-punische Grammatik* (Analecta Orientalia 32, Rom 1951), und daß die zusammengesetzten Pflanzennamen zumeist offensichtlich nicht den morphemkombinatorischen Regeln des heutigen Berberischen folgen. Nur eine gründliche Untersuchung könnte zeigen, ob ein Teil der Wörter dem Libysch-Berberischen, dem Punischen oder anderen Sprachen entstammt.

¹⁾ Wellmann 1906, 1907, griechische Ausgabe; Berendes 1902, deutsche Übersetzung.